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**BETWEEN BRIDGES AND BARRIERS:
THE POLEMIC BORDER SITUATION
IN THE AFRICAN INTEGRATION**

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Abstract:

During the last century, the controversial drawing of borders in the political map of Africa has become the main obstacle for a pacific coexistence and for the economic and social development. Now, the African Union has launched a set of initiatives intending to revert that negative situation.

Keywords:

African Union, borders, African integration, armed conflicts, decolonization process.

INTRODUCTION

On June 7th, the African Union (AU) held the celebration of the Borders Day, an initiative that is part of the African Union Border Programme (AUBP) launched by this regional organization, with the aim of contributing to pacification and conflict resolution between Member States¹. "Joining and integrating Africa through open, peaceful and prosperous borders" is the motto the AU has chosen for this set of measures, and it synthesizes the high expectations its implementation² has raised.

In order to support this celebration and with the aim of highlighting the importance of the event in the future of CONTINENTAL integration, all the economic and trade multilateral organizations were present (the Southern African Development Community, the East African Economic Community or the Economic Community of West African States, among others), as well as several representatives of the European Union³.

Also, the Borders Day was presented as an opportunity to strengthen pacification processes and conflict resolution and the coexistence between governments and ethnic, political and religious groups that live in Africa. Thus, it is intended to emphasize the importance of territorial boundaries as an essential element for the integration in the continent. Africa has the urgent need to solve this issue, so the continent can stop being perpetually associated with the conflicts that have occurred since the European powers fought against each other in order to have control of the African territories, and then distributed those territories according to arbitrary criteria. With the beginning of the decolonization process, which took place during the middle decades of the 20th century, some conflicts over territorial division have worsened, and nowadays they still remain evident. This was a main consequence of dividing ethnic or religious groups by a vague boundary, in which two States have tried, with mixed success, to assert their authority. The issues of the relations of coexistence between minorities and governments generated a dynamic of rebellion and repression. It, thus, facilitated the emergence of various armed groups that have fought against both enemy groups and one or several government forces. The fierce conflicts in the Great Lakes region (around the borders of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda), Ethiopia and Sudan are some of the most paradigmatic examples.

¹ <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/aubp-dec-e.pdf>. Last access: 22nd June 2013

² More available information on this programme at <http://www.peaceau.org/en/page/27-au-border-programme-aubp>. Last access: 23rd June 2013.

³ Go to http://www.gicafrika.diplo.de/Vertretung/suedafrika-dz/en/_pr/2013/06/06-Addis-borders.html. Last Access 23 June 2013.

THE DIFFICULT BORDER LEGACY IN THE AFRICAN UNION

At the time the first continental integration project was launched, whose 50th anniversary is commemorated this year, the territorial boundaries of countries involved was one of the first topics discussed in the then called Organization of African Unity (OAU). Similarly, in July 2014 it will be the half century anniversary of the AHG Resolution 16 (1), signed in Cairo on the first Regular General Meeting of the organization⁴.

In the first paragraph the fear that existed in the OAU, with the possibility (later confirmed over and over) that disputes over borders would become the main cause of insecurity, instability and violence, is already reflected. In order to mend these negative expectations, and inspired by the spirit of the Founding Charter of the OAU, which claimed a unity no matter the ethnic and national differences, governments that faced the task of leading the independence assumed, as starting-point or as the lesser of two evils, borders inherited from the colonial era.

In any case, the decision that was taken is in line with one of the opening paragraphs that leads the 1963 Constitutive Treaty: "the inalienable right of our people to manage their own destiny."⁵ At the same time, the OAU itself circumscribed the debate and resolution of existing conflicts to an area purported to be exclusively African. A desire that has not been accomplished throughout the history of the former colonies, and that has recently been taken up with enthusiasm in all continental integration forums.

According to the brief resolution of the OAU to which we refer, it was a "tangible reality" that also coincided with the views expressed by the signatory states of the organization Constitutive Treaty, (Articles 3 and 4). From that preexisting given reality present in the organization, measures should be proposed to help strengthen the unity among the new sovereign states. In this regard, it urged to all governments, political parties, and citizens to strictly respect their boundaries. This principle, however, has been violated and forgotten by governments and non-state actors involved in the many conflicts that have taken place. All too often, it has been impossible to impose the exercise of "sovereign equality" of all states, nor has it been able to prevent that the principle of noninterference in the internal affairs has become a mere decoration, as part of the set of good intentions that were set out at the time of the OAU foundation.

⁴ The whole text of the first approved resolutions of the OUA Assembly can be retrieved at: [http://www.au.int/en/sites/default/files/ASSEMBLY_EN_17_21_JULY_1964_ASSEMBLY_HEADS_STATE_GOV
ERNMENT_FIRST_ORDINARY_SESSION.pdf](http://www.au.int/en/sites/default/files/ASSEMBLY_EN_17_21_JULY_1964_ASSEMBLY_HEADS_STATE_GVERNMENT_FIRST_ORDINARY_SESSION.pdf). Last Access: 23rd June 2013.

⁵ The whole Treaty can be retrieved at: http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/africa/OAU_Charter_1993.html. Last access: 24th June 2013.

Over time, and before launching the African Union Border Programme, the organization made other attempts to redirect border disputes and reach normal neighborly relations. The MOU (Memorandum of Understanding), approved in 2000, was the most prominent⁶.

PAST ARBITRARY ACTS VS. CONTINUITY: TWO COUNTERED APPROACHES

Instead of the revisionist thesis, the acceptance of the status quo was imposed, however, the revisionist thesis still remain active in the continental political debate. These are the two approaches that have, since then, dominated the political and academic discussions. The official thesis argues that the objective of stability is incompatible with a rethinking of the political map of Africa. Backed by the contents of the UN Charter, the AU has argued the validity of a number of basic principles of international law, as well as sovereignty and territorial inviolability.

There have been a few exceptions to the validity of the official doctrine on African borders. The most prominent are Eritrea and the Republic of South Sudan, which became independent in 1993 and 2011. It is in the experience of these two territories that the ones contrary to the general review of the boundaries of states use to defend their point of view. The independence of South Sudan has opened new conflicts and none of the existing ones that faced the two halves of the original Sudan have ended. Most of the border is still at war, supporting rebel factions in the neighboring territory in order to destabilize his government.

On the other hand, those who advocate the opening of an extensive process of redrawing borders have the powerful argument of the terrible history of the continent in the last five decades. From this perspective, the arbitrariness in the delimitation of the colonies is presented as the source of ethnic and territorial conflicts that have taken place since African states became independent. It is a path, they argue, that has favored the interests of those who have tried to gain exclusive control over natural wealth, reducing the importance of both resources and dignity of indigenous peoples.

⁶The whole document is available at www.peaceau.org/uploads/mou-au-rec-eng.pdf. Last access: 22th June 2013.

In an intermediate place we find those who, even if recognizing and censoring the damages attributable to the drawing of the political map of Africa by the European powers, reject, at the same time, a determinism that also limits the possibilities of development for the continent. Although we find just a few, there are some examples of peaceful resolutions of border disputes, as for example the dispute Tanzania and Malawi keep open in the International Court about Lake Malawi.

Moreover, considering that the situation in the past will condition African countries for life means detracting social, political, institutional and economic skills of the continent.

MAIN ISSUES IN THE AFRICAN BORDERS

They are obstacles that impose the biggest number of difficulties on the creation of zones chaired by coexistence and peaceful and fluid trade and human relations:

a) Orographical difficulties:

They limit transport facilities and communication and multiply the feeling of isolation of people and their neighbors that are on the other side but really close physically.

b) Halted conflicts

They contribute to the implication of a neighbor country that wants to destabilize the other country. Supporting an ethnic or religious group, controlling the natural resources situated in the border, or closing the territory to the arrival of new rebels or refugees, are some of the reasons that motivate those interventions.

c) The border porosity

Institutional weaknesses present in many of the African countries, make borders become a meeting and passage place for networks that traffic all kind of objects and substances. Guinea-Bissau, considered first dealer state of the world by the international community, is the most representative example. Furthermore, the porosity of the borders favors the transfer of international terrorist groups that may seek refuge in nearby countries or that want to implant cells to attack various governments and international interests. This is what has happened with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) or factions linked to al Qaeda in the Sahel area.

CONCLUSIONS

Bridges, elected by the AU as an icon of its integration initiative also suggest rigid and static structures with a heavily regulated traffic. Rather, borders could evolve to become confluent areas, where open and safe transit of goods and exchange of experiences and mutual learning are held. That is the challenge that must be solved at the AU, with a strong commitment by all those involved in conflict resolution.

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